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President's CIA views draw fire

Carter, Mondale call remarks 'false'

From Staff and Wire Reports

WASHINGTON — President Reagan, in the wake of his suggestion Wednesday that U.S. intelligence capability was nearly destroyed before he took office, drew sharp criticism yesterday from Walter F. Mondale, former President Jimmy Carter and former directors of the CIA.

Mr. Reagan, meanwhile, said the remarks about the CIA that he made at a campaign stop in Bowling Green, Ohio, had been "distorted" by the press. White House spokesman Larry Speakes said Mr. Reagan had not meant to blame the Carter administration for the lack of warning about last week's bombing of the U.S. Embassy annex in Beirut, but rather to put the responsibility on a decade-long "climate in Congress that resulted in inadequate funding and support for intelligence-gathering capabilities" during both the Ford and Carter administrations.

The controversy was touched off when Mr. Reagan, in response to a question about security at U.S. embassies, talked of the need for improved intelligence to guard against attacks. He cited the "near destruction of our intelligence capability in recent years — before we came here" and added that "we're trying to rebuild our intelligence to where you'll find out and know in advance what the target might be and be prepared for it."

Asked Wednesday whether Mr. Reagan was referring to cutbacks in intelligence staffing under President Carter, a White House spokesman said, "I'll let you draw your own conclusions, but you wouldn't be wrong."

At a press conference in New York yesterday, Mr. Mondale launched a blistering attack on Mr. Reagan's handling of U.S. security in Lebanon. In response to reporters'

questions, he said the president must admit responsibility for "inexcusable" lapses in security for U.S. personnel in Lebanon that permitted the bombing at the embassy annex.

The Democratic candidate also said the president had undermined the security interests of the United States by saying, as Mr. Reagan did Wednesday, that the U.S. intelligence capability was weak.

"In saying the CIA is weak, he encourages the same terrorists and our enemies around the world to believe that we don't have an effective intelligence capacity, when we do," Mr. Mondale said.

"That's dead wrong," he said of the president's charge that the Carter-Mondale administration had left U.S. intelligence agencies "near destruction."

"This is 1984 — not 1980," Mr. Mondale added, "and he's responsible for that government."

Earlier yesterday, Mr. Carter issued a statement from his Atlanta office calling Mr. Reagan's statement false and "personally insulting."

The former president said he had "listened with disappointment and anger" for 3½ years "to a stream of false assertions made by President Reagan in his attempt to blame his every mistake and failure on me and others who served before him in the White House."

He said he had not responded "to these many innuendoes and deliberate misstatements of fact" out of respect to the office of the president.

But he said Mr. Reagan's claim Wednesday, in Mr. Carter's words, "that his predecessors are responsible for the repeated terrorist bombings of Americans is personally insulting and too gross in its implications to ignore."

"He only has to question his own administration officials to determine that his statement was also completely false," Mr. Carter said.

"This series of tragedies in the Middle East has been brought about by the president's own deeply flawed policy and inadequate security precautions in the face of proven danger."

He also said Mr. Reagan's "frivolous reference to tardy kitchen repairs" in explaining why increased security measures at the embassy annex were not completed before last week "is indicative of his refusal to face the reality of his own responsibility."

Mr. Carter's reference was to Mr. Reagan's statement Sunday in New York comparing work being done to improve security at the embassy annex to home remodeling. "About 75 percent of all the work that had to be done had been completed," the president said. "Anyone who ever had the kitchen done over knows it never gets done as soon as you wish it would."

Mr. Carter said Mr. Reagan "should apologize for these misleading statements to the American people, and particularly to the many suffering families of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in Lebanon."

More broadly, several former high intelligence officials said the cutback in overseas intelligence agents began in 1967, long before the Carter administration. It was carried out, they said, under Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter and by 1978, the Carter White House had reversed the trend and was pushing for increases in intelligence funds.

Moreover, several officials said that there had been no intelligence failure before the Beirut bombing because warnings from terrorist groups about such an attack had been made public.

Stansfield Turner, CIA director under President Carter, said that Mr. Reagan's remarks were "some of the most undignified, unworthy comments from a president I've ever seen. It's unfair for any president 3½ years into office to try to cast blame on his predecessor. He's had plenty of time to do whatever he wants to do with the intelligence apparatus."

Mr. Turner said the CIA budget, which is classified, doubled during the Carter administration, and he charged that Mr. Reagan was "desperately trying to justify his failures in the midst of an election campaign."

Mr. Turner said he eliminated 820 positions at the CIA in 1977 in response to recommendations made by agency professionals during the Ford administration. He said that the cuts were made only at agency headquarters in the context of reducing staffing levels that had been bloated during the Vietnam War and that they affected "bureaucratic overhead in Washington" and not "intelligence operations overseas."

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William E. Colby, who served in a Republican administration as CIA director from September, 1974, to January, 1976, said there was a gradual decline in numbers of CIA agents because beginning in 1976 there was a decline in covert action, in operations that try to influence other countries, and a shift to intelligence collection and analysis.

He also said that "the problem in Beirut was not a failure of intelligence but a problem of putting in proper security."

Other former senior intelligence officials said Richard Helms and James R. Schlesinger, the directors of Central Intelligence under Presidents Johnson and Nixon, had eliminated 1,000 to 1,500 overseas agents in a deliberate plan to scale down the agency as American involvement in Vietnam and Southeast Asia was phased out.

President Reagan made a brief reference to the politically sensitive dispute yesterday at a picture-taking session in the White House Rose Garden. He said, "I will answer your questions about the way you have distorted my remarks about the CIA," but he did not elaborate.

Mr. Speakes, the White House spokesman, later told reporters that Mr. Reagan's remark Wednesday was intended to emphasize the need for more "human intelligence" capabilities, as opposed to electronic intelligence gathering. He said Mr. Reagan was "talking about human intelligence gathering capability, not dollars, but the emphasis of where the dollars that are in the CIA are put."

The White House explanations came after Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D, N.Y.) released a March 8 letter from CIA Director William J. Casey in which Mr. Casey said that a beefing up of the CIA took place during the last two years of the Carter administration. Mr. Carter was president from January, 1977, to January, 1981.

"All of us know that the increase in the personnel and budgetary strength of the agency began in 1979, that it was planned and proposed earlier, and that it cannot be completed without strong bipartisan support," Mr. Casey wrote. "I fully share your conviction that the vital functioning of this agency cannot be risked or impaired through any use of CIA for partisan political purposes."

Mr. Casey's letter to Mr. Moynihan, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, was in response to the senator's criticism of a statement by Mr. Speakes last December that the CIA had been "crippled" during the Carter years.